



Impact of Baladev Cult on the Socio-Economic and Religious Life of the People of Odisha

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In medieval period, Vaishnavism shaped the socio-religious life of the people of Odisha. Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were inseparable and predominated among the Vaishnavite Gods of Odisha. The same rituals are performed for the Jews in the Baladevjew temple as at Puri. Right from the days of Sarala, Panchasakha and Sri Chaitanya, Vaishnavism had become very popular in the fifteenth-sixteenth century A.D. In due course of time, Balabhadra was adored a lot. He was projected as the God of Agriculture by the Brahmins who associated many agro-festivals with Balabhadra. By Seventeenth Century A.D. and more particularly,

with the building of Baladevjew temple at Kendrapara, agriculture was more popularized. Besides this, other trends of Vaishnavism like amity, fraternity and equality were largely practised by the people of Odisha. The impact of Baladev cult on the socio-economic and religious life of the people have been discussed in this chapter. Baladev cult and Jagannath cult are synonymous and used in interchangeable terms.

With the coming of Sri Chaitanya, the position of Brahmins dwindled away as Prataprudradeva gave vent to Vaishnavism. In fact, Vaishnavism tried to narrow down the gaps between higher caste and lower caste in the society. When Brahmins lost their position in the society and found it difficult to earn their livelihood, they tried to resort to agriculture which was not permissible in the society. However, the Brahmins tried to give it a religious tinge by depicting Balabhadra, as a God of agriculture and justified themselves to resort to agriculture. They even termed themselves as 'Balabhadragotriya Brahmana' or 'Halua Brahmana' (a class of Brahmins who plough). They translated a Sanskrit text *Krisiparasara* into Odia language





and named it as *Khana Vachana*. It contained several astronomical and astrological predictions, auspicious moment for starting journey and several other things. However, it put much emphasis on agricultural production. The Balabhadragotriya Brahmins not only resorted to agriculture but advised the people how to cultivate the land and get more production. The religious sanction behind this was the projection of Balabhadra with plough who was the God of agriculture. They showed ways to take up agriculture.

In *Khanavachana*, it is described that the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) signals the beginning of an agrarian year. However, *Baisakha* (April-May) is chosen as the starting month of agricultural activities. Sowing of seeds begins herein the very day of *Akshaya Tritiya* in the month of *Baisakha*. For cultivation weather prediction is very much indispensable. As per the suggestion of *Khanavachana*, if winter prevails in *Chaitra*, storm takes place with hailstones in *Baisakha* and if sky remains clear in *Jyestha*, then there will be good rainfall in the month of *Ashadha*.¹ Further, it predicts that if stars appear inside the circle encompassing the moon, there will be heavy shower of rainfall.² Similarly, if wind blows from the opposite direction of the cloud in *Bhadra* (August-September), then there will be immediate rainfall.³ Following these predictions, the peasants must be careful for starting agricultural work.

Explaining about plough work, *Khanavachana* suggests that the plough work is

to be started just after the rainfall. The agriculturist has to follow some sort of auspicious time for starting the work. A farmer has to avoid any inauspicious sound at the time of his journey to the field. He should plough the field from the four directions beginning from the east.⁴ The prohibited days of ploughing have also been suggested i.e. the fullmoon day and newmoon day. If violating the rule the agriculturist tills his land during those days, the bullocks will suffer from diseases and the farmer will be considered as a sinner and his face is not to be seen by anybody.⁵

For agricultural purpose, *Chaturmasya* is important which consists of four consecutive months, i.e. *Ashadha*, *Sravan*, *Bhadra* and *Aswina*. Usually, the farmers advance agricultural work starting from the month of *Ashadha* which does not exceed *Aswina*. If he starts the *Veusana* (resetting the paddy plants through ploughing after heavy rain) work in the month of *Ashadha*, he is expected to get good harvest and if he starts it by *Sravana*, he gets bit less, *Bhadra* fetches still less harvest and *Aswina* gives nil output.⁶

Coming to Plantation (*ropana*), *Khana* suggests that if it is done within first five days of *Ashadha*, there will be a good harvest. In the process of plantation paddy should be planted with regular distance from each other. Then only those plants will be able to get considerable opportunity for healthy growth and ultimately it will help in producing more crops.⁷

Plantation is a general phenomenon associated with agriculture. Almost all the books related with agriculture in medieval period



invariably tell about paddy cultivation. However, Khana simply does not confine her advice to the cultivation of paddy alone. She also tells about other crops like betel, potato, brinjal, mango, mustard, chilly, turmeric, sugarcane, etc. and gives different times for their plantation.⁸

Coming to reaping of paddy, Khana says that if it is harvested in *Margasira*, the farmer will get maximum, in *Pousa* (November) sixty per cent less, in *Magha* only straws and in *Phalguna* (February-March) nothing. She also suggests that a farmer will cut the paddy thirty days after coming of bud (*thoda*), twenty days after it leaves its flower and thirteen days after it beads down. Similarly she suggested to plant banana in *Phalguna* which will produce fruit after one month, to plant brinjal in every month leaving *Chaitra* and *Baisakh*, to plant betel in *Sravana* for good harvest etc.⁹

From the hoary past, agriculture has been accepted as one of the ways for livelihood for all. However, so far as society is concerned, right from the later Vedic age, the Vaisyas were entitled to handle this work not only for their livelihood but appropriating the surplus for others. It has been suggested by our ancient law givers that if the Brahmins fail to earn their livelihood by their respective professions (*adhyayana*, *adhyapana*, *yajana*, *dana* and *pratigraha*) they are permitted to switch over to agriculture.¹⁰ The *Krisi Parasara*, an Odishan treatise on agriculture suggests the degradation of Brahmins to accept agriculture for their livelihood. The same law was also applicable to the Kshatriyas.¹¹

Subsequently, this sort of adjustment gave way to recognize agriculture as the main profession for all castes. That is why Parasara the only authority in ancient Indian legal literature permitted even the Brahmins to resort to agriculture.¹²

If the agriculturist, knowing details of the rainfall, does not acquire adequate knowledge of ploughing time and place, he fails to maintain agriculture in a purposeful way. So Khana has exercised her brilliancy in speaking some sort of useful manual in this regard. It is a matter of importance that the farmer has to start ploughing land from the eastern direction.¹³ Mention may be made here that Indra, the lord of rainfalls is the presiding deity of eastern direction. If ploughing is started from this direction with invocation to Indra, the rain god favours the agriculturist by supplying sufficient water through rainfall. That is why the eastern direction is so much important in *Khanavachana* for starting the plough work.

Further, the days prohibited for ploughing are another factor to be discussed here since newmoon and fullmoon days for sacrifices (*Yajna*) of ectype (*Prkrti*) character, no one is allowed to get rid of these sacrifice. If the agriculturist resorts to the ploughing, he will not be able to perform those sacrifices. This is why, without referring to this core point, Khana directly instructs the agriculturists not to plough the land in those two sacrificial days.

Tools of agriculture are to be taken into consideration. Though Khana does not give details of agricultural tools, still one comes across many a references of such tools in



Khanavachana like spade, sickle, plough, yoke, blade, etc. of which *Kodala* (spade) is of very significant character. It is known from Smṛti literature¹⁴ that for the first time in history of agriculture in human civilization, *Kodala* was the first hand tool to till the land for sowing seeds. That is why one of the householders of the Vedic time was designated as *Kuddalaba*. Khana, by referring *Kodala*, tries to maintain uninterrupted cultural link following from the Vedic times till today.

From one place to another, the plant is to be transferred for healthy growth. Khana, in this regard gives a practical picture by differentiating atmosphere for plantation of paddy from the date of plantation of betel, potato, banana, brinjal, coconut etc. She suggests that the paddy plant is to be planted in sunshine. Mention may be made here that paddy is treated as *ashadhi* (crop) in the Vedic period, the lord of which is Moon. Since Moon appears in the night and at that time sedition is possible, the paddy planted at day time gets opportunity for healthy growth. Unless paddy is planted in sunshine, it does not bear the capacity to grow for bearing healthy crops. Sunshine gives life energy not only to the people but plants at large. That is why importance is given to sunshine for paddy plantation by taking into account its valid necessity.

Why has so much explanation been given here regarding agriculture ? In 15th-16th Century A.D. with the spread of Vaishnavism in Odisha, the Brahmins could not get proper position in the society. They resorted to agriculture and devised

means to attract people for agriculture. They advised people how to plough the field and sow seeds, how to reap and get good crops. They associated several agro-functions like *Akshaya Tritiya*, *Raja Sankranti* which falls in *Ashadha* (June-July), *Gamha Purnima* (August-September) and *Manavasa* etc. On the very day of *Akshaya Tritiya*, the seeds are to be sown. Right from the beginning of the *Niti* in the temple of Baladevjeu, it has been decided that before four days of *Akshaya Tritiya*, a meeting is to be held there attended by many people of the locality.¹⁵ Decision will be taken from which direction and by what time plough work should start on the day of *Akshaya Tritiya*. Gradually many temples of various locality have followed this practice. Even the Chief Minister of Odisha and other Ministers of his cabinet go on the day of *Akshaya Tritiya* to different districts to plough the land and sow seeds on the land thereby signaling the beginning of the agricultural activities in different areas. In every sense, the Baladev cult has given vent to agriculture. Even if the modern methods have been applied to the agriculture, the old tradition has its unbroken continuity through the Baladev cult.

The *Khanavachana*, which was composed in 17th-18th Century A.D. in Odisha, by the Brahmins who devised suitable means through it to resort to agriculture for earning their livelihood since the ploughing tool *Hala* is connected with Balabhadra, the Brahmins chose him as the first progenitor of their race by designating themselves as *Balabhadragotriya* Brahmins.¹⁶ Thus, Balabhadra cult helped them



to get back their fallen position in the society thereby being wise counsellors as agriculture to the people. Their precarious economic condition was also improved when they resorted to agriculture. Thus, the social tension which had taken place in 16th-17th Century A.D. was subsided by the cleverly manipulation of principles of *Krisi Parasara* reflected through *Khanavachana* which eased the situation by again giving the Brahmins their lost position in the society although the position of a sect of Brahmins (*Balabhadragotriya*) was lowered among their society. Thus, Balabhadra worship has influenced the society and also economy of this land by popularizing agriculture.¹⁷

Another impact of Baladev cult on the Odishan culture is its universality. *Ratha Yatra* of God Jagannath and Balabhadra is its best example. This has allured the attention of the people across the world. In this Car Festival there is no distinction between caste, creed and sex. Everyone is free to have a *darshan* of the Gods on the Chariot on that day. This speaks of the great culture of Odisha which reflects amity, fraternity, equality and universality. Everyone is a potential soul to see the God (Supreme Soul) placed on the *Ratha*. This creates a religious ethos in which everyone is mingled. The Balabhadra Cult (synonymous with Jagannath Cult) has exerted an abiding effect on the people of Odisha by bringing them together. Perhaps, this is the greatest influence of Baladev cult on the socio-religious sphere.

The Vaishnavite culture represented through Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath is

soaked in 'Sanatana' humanism i.e. neither materialistic nor spiritualistic but is compatible with both.¹⁸ It gives a feeling to the people of Odisha that the Gods are present with them in the human form. Like family members, they visit the deities in the temple. In every auspicious ceremony, people visit the temple as they visit the ceremonies of their friends. This humanistic aspect of the cult of Baladev is, in fact, glaring.

This Vaishnavite culture centering round Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath has created a striking balance between freedom and creativity, on one hand discipline and restraint, on the other. The martial arts of Odisha originating of the '*Akhada*' tradition of 15th-16th century is the projection of the martial spirit of the land. The various *Veshas* of the deity like 'Kandaramardana', 'Bakasura Badha', 'Dhenuka Badha', 'Pralambasura Badha', etc.¹⁹ project the martial spirit of the Odias which are even to-day displayed during the *Rathayatra* of the Gods and in several occasions including Durga Puja.

The *Mukti Mandapa* of the Jew has become a symbol of wisdom. It is the open air theatre of discourse where wise counsels are given to weary-ridden people who come to seek redemption. The *Mukti Mandapa* at Puri and the same inside the temple of Baladev have kept this tradition vibrant even today. The Pundits who sit there frame socio-religious laws to govern the people. For expiation, people from the nook and corner visit the '*Mukti Mandapa*'²⁰ which shows the abiding influence of this cult on the people of Odisha.



The worship of Trinity is very popular in the nook and corner of Odisha. In each and every auspicious ceremony in the family – whether religious, social, personal or political – the names of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath are taken. This shows the wide popularity and acceptance of this cult among the people of Odisha. This *Dharma*²¹ has been truth's embodiment of life and has always given the Odias the power to refashion their nature as per contemporary and moral imperatives.²²

This Balabhadra Cult aims at harmony. The elements of diversity in Odishan society on the basis of caste or ethnicity has been functionally tackled by the institution of '*Sevayata Nijoga*' in the Baladevjew temple. The multi-Sevayat system in the Baladevjew temple at Kendrapara is like the '*Chhatisaniyoga*' in the Puri Jagannath Temple.²³ Here every servitor feels proud to do his part associating himself in the worship of the Jews in the temple. Even a *Kaivarta* (fisherman) has the same right as the Brahmins of the temple. Thus, the concept of cultural pluralists has been ironed out in the temple of Baladevjew by the service rendered by the *Sevayats*. Thus, the Baladevjew temple has become a symbol of cordial inter-caste relations. Infact, it has created a cementing force for binding all in one rope relating casteism into the distant background.

Ever since the Odishan empire was consecrated to the God (Jagannath) making Him the temporal and ecclesiastical head of Odisha in the Kanchi expedition²⁴ of Purusottamdeva, the state has evinced a political culture of being a

'Holy Jagannath Empire'. In the romantic Kanchi-Kaveri legend God Balabhadra and Jagannath had marched towards Kanchi by riding horses and had made king Purusottamdeva victorious. Right from that day, King became the first servitor of the Gods as was reflected in the performance of *Chhera-Pahanra* before the Chariots of the Gods on the auspicious day of car festival. This tradition is preserved in Odishan culture since that hoary past.

The socio-economic structure of Odisha has been another determinant of its political as well as individual culture. Surrender to the divine will gives an emphasis on *Dharma, Artha, Kama* and *Moksha* has become the order of the day. This is due to the abiding influence of Jagannath *Dharma*. The cult has become very popular in the nook and corner of Odisha. It has aroused the self-consciousness of the people of this land to be a follower of this cult.

The food habit of the people has been largely influenced in this cult. Varieties of food prepared in the temple are also being followed by the people. *The Khechudi, Vesara, Mahura*²⁵ and other curries served to the Jews are also being prepared by the people. This food-culture of the temple has spread in the nook and corner of Odisha. In different social functions, now *Prasada* from the temple of Baladevjew or any Jagannath temple is being taken with different curries and served to the guests in a religious atmosphere. This *Prasada* culture has cast its spell over the people of Odisha who have now adopted it as a way to meet the need of the social functions.



The picture of a composite social unity and family bondage is reflected through this cult. During the car festival, the Gods came to give *Darshan* to the people. The eternal love and bondage between brother and sister is reflected through this function. It is, infact, the portrayal of the typical family picture of Odishan society. Even wife (Goddess Laxmi) is neglected when the brothers (Balabhadra and Jagannath) take their sister (Subhadra) with them. This exerts influence on the Odishan family. Similarly, the birth of Balabhadra is celebrated in the temple as '*Gamha Purnima*' where He is offered *Rakshi*. The same *Raksha Vandhan* is followed in the nook and corner of Odisha like other parts of India.

Among many delicious food of the temple of Baladevjew, the *Rasabali*²⁶ is famous. It is unique in its style. The soft cakes are prepared with flour and cheese and dipped in the sweet milk. This has become so famous that every part of Odisha, in general and Jagannath temples, in particular adopt the practice of preparing *Rasabali*. The tourists who come to visit Baladevjew temple are tempted to take this *Rasabali*. The *Gudia-Pandas* of the temple prepare these *Rasabalis* in such a way that it has its own charm. When the name of *Rasabali* comes, one is reminded of the one prepared at the Baladevjew temple.

The Baladevjew cult like Jagannath has promoted the habit of fasting among the people of Odisha. *Upabasa*²⁷ (fasting) is performed on various occasions. *Ekadasi* or the eleventh day

of each fortnight of the lunar month is observed as such. As per the temple rituals, four important *Ekadasis* like the *Ashadha Sukla Ekadasi*, *Karttika Sukla Ekadasi*, *Magha Sukla Ekadasi* and *Baisakha Sukla Ekadasi* are performed by the pious people of Odisha, particularly by the widows who observe them without food and drink. Infact, the Vaishnavites observe these days to enhance the glory of these days in a year. The *Bhadra Krishna Chaturdasi* is also observed by them as a day of fasting. These traditions maintained in the temple of Baladevjew have influenced the people to perform the fasting in these auspicious days. These fastings, as psychologists observe, have changed the life-style of the people of Odisha. Their behavioural pattern, attitudes, beliefs and values have undergone change by fasting. Now, of course, many people are observing 'fasting' not for the sake of religious practices or for performing religious rites and rituals but for 'dieting' purposes.

Thus conceived, the Baladev cult has cast its spell on the politico-socio-economic and religious spheres in Odisha. It has reduced the rigidity of the caste system to a great extent by diluting the caste system through its famous car festival. This cult has tried to bind the people in the rope of love, amity and fraternity. Its universalism has been widely accepted and applauded by the people. Being a synthesis in itself, it has tried to bring social harmony. Odishan culture has been greater due to the influence of Baladev Cult.



References :

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, Ch.I, Verse-9.
5. Ibid, Verse-9.
6. Ibid, Verse-4
7. Ibid, Verse-13
8. Ibid, For detail see Ch.I of *Khanavachana*.
9. Ibid.
10. *Manusmriti*, Ch.X. v. 75.
11. Vide B.K.Swain's Article "Water Ordeal in Medieval Orissa: A Study on the Smriti Records pertaining to the Gajapati Period", Published in the *Journal of the Oriental Institute*, Vol.43, Nos. 1-2, Sept-Dec, 1993, p.64.
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17. B.Das, op.cit., p.115.
18. H.S.Pattnaik, 'Jagannath Cult as factor contributing to Oriya Identity', N.R.Pattnaik, op.cit., p.318.
19. For detail, vide, *supra*, Ch.IV.
20. H.S.Pattnaik, op.cit., p.319.
21. M.Tripathy, 'The Holy Trinity', *Orissa Review*, June-July, 2005, p.95.
22. H.C.Pattnaik, op.cit., p.312.
23. S.C.Mohapatra, 'Socialism in Jagannath Culture', *Orissa Review*, June-July, 2007, p.35.
24. For detail, vide, *supra*, Ch.II.
25. 'Khechudi' is boiled rice with turmeric, *Vesara and Mahura* are curries offered to the gods in the temple.
26. Rasabali is a special bhoga of the Baladev temple which is very famous in the nook and corner of Odisha.
27. T.Mahapatra, 'Fasting': Its Socio-Religious Significance in Orissa', N.R.Pattnaik, op.cit., p.87.

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